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Thirteen Negro mothers of preschool children who attended a day care program participated in a series o f six weekly meetings led by an educator and devoted to (1) discussion and demonstration o f ways the mothers could expand their children's learning skills and (2) discussion of aspects of the mother-child relationship. The reason for these group meetings, called the participant small group method, was to attempt to reduce the conflict between the home environment and school environment of disadvantaged children. This reduction in conflict was to be accomplished by improving the emotional relations of the family and the cognitive-intellectual functioning of the family. In general, all of the mothers seemed quite concerned about their competency as mothers; but because of the small extent of the program's impact, it seems unlikely that it was very effective in modifying the mothers' behavior. (WD)

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Reaching the Hard-to-Reach: The Use of Participant Group Methods with Mothers of Culturally Disadvantaged Preschool Children*

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Early in life the child learns the style of behavior which destines him for a particular kind of social, economic, and emotional existence. As the primary socializing influences on the child, parents directly and indirectly determine their child's personality structure, his values, his aspirations, etc. They shape his behavior through their interactions with him by directly modeling, reinforcing, or extinguishing his coping mechanisms, a construct suggested by the ego psychologists. Occupying a key role in the socialization process, the parents appear to mediate the demonstrated relationships between social class variables, on the one hand, and outcome variables, like mental illness, delinquency, intelligence, and school achievement, on the other.

If a child develops coping mechanisms which articulate and investigate his environment rather than repress, deny, and act out, he is fortunate in at least two respects: emotionally and cognitively-intellectually. Emotionally, this child is less likely to become a delinquent as an adolescent or a psychotic as an adult. Cognitively-intellectually, the child who explores, verbalizes freely, and asks questions, is likely to become more intelligent, perform better in school, continue his education farther, and achieve more vocational success.

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There are several relevant studies of social class and socialization (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Miller and Swanson, 1958). As Hess and Shipman (1965) observe, the issue of whether social class is related to socialization has been well-established. Rather, the issue is, how does social class influence the socialization processes. Hess and Shipman argue that "the central quality involved in the effects of cultural deprivation is a lack of cognitive meaning in the mother-child communication system; and that the growth of cognitive processes is fostered in family control systems which offer and permit a wide range of alternative of action and thought and that such growth is constricted by systems of control which offer pre-determined solutions and few alternatives for consideration and choice" (1965, p. 870).

"In the deprived family context this means that the nature of the control system which relates parent to child restricts the number and kind of alternatives of action and thought that are opened; such constriction precludes a tendency for the child to reflect, to consider and choose among alternatives for speech and action. It develops modes for dealing with stimuli and problems which are impulsive rather than reflective, which deal with the immediate rather than the future, and which are disconnected rather than sequential" (Hess and Shipman, 1968).

The Hess-Shipman analysis regarding cognitive growth is highly relevant to emotional growth as well. They view the schools and we may add, Headstart and Day Care programs, as socializing agencies. In contrast to the middle-class child's situation, whose familial and preschool environments enhance and reinforce each other, the lower-class child's familial and preschool environments may be in conflict. Often, the incompatible social milieus may offset one another, and thus the preschool program's effectiveness is lost. At worst, the child may internalize the conflicting values from each milieu, and be more likely to become emotionally disturbed at a later time.

One way to resolve the conflict would be to adopt the lower socioeconomic class standards in the preschool program. The other alternative is to change the family. How can this change be accomplished? At least we can say that it would not be accomplished by a frontal attack on the family's values. There are two main tasks:

I. To improve the emotional relations in the families by helping:
   a. To improve the parents themselves, and
   b. The parents to help their children to change.

II. To improve the cognitive-intellectual functions in families by helping:
   a. To improve the parents themselves, and
   b. The parents to help their children to change.

The Search for Methods

The lower socioeconomic class parents are unfortunately, the least accessible to treatment or remedial programs of any kind. Thus, an additional, very progmatic provisional goal was thrust upon us: to establish a trusting relationship that would be stable and solid enough to work on deeply entrenched behavioral patterns.

Either individual work (the paradigm of social welfare service which many mothers had experienced), or a large instructional group in which the mother was a part of a passive audience, seemed unlikely to succeed. Ultimately, a program that did not involve its participants had to fail. Thus, we felt that it would be easier for the parents to become involved in a small group composed of <u>others in the same situation</u>, than to become involved in other kinds of programs. The experience of doing psychotherapy with the culturally disadvantaged indicates that group sessions are more effective than individual sessions. There are various reasons to explain this phenomenon: attitudes toward authority, social comparisons processes, following the therapist's model, differences in the communication pattern between the middle-class patient-therapist combinations and lower-class, middle-class patient-therapist combination, etc. Whatever these reasons may be, it was felt useful to exploit this possible source of gain.

The participant small group method appeared to be a potentially useful technique to evaluate and, where necessary, to intervene in the possible detrimental parent-child interactions. With this method, the other group members provide the reference group and basic impetus for change.

The participant small group method, which is termed T-group method ("T" for training) or human relations laboratory, is described in Bradford, Gibb and Benne (1964). Several aspects of T-group methods seemed especially appropriate for our purposes:

1. Task Orientation. Those implementing social change recommend the use of task orientation rather than value or emotional orientation. The cognitive skills focus on the groups provided an acceptable rationale to the parents for their participation. Moreover, it provided a concrete, relatively non-threatening task for the group members to work on.
2. To have role models who by repeated demonstration:
   (a) Increase communication by labeling feelings, questioning, summarizing, etc., and
   (b) Encourage initiative and curiosity. Leaders are businesslike in their return to the task at hand, yet informal in their manners, and sympathetic listeners as the situation demands.
3. Communication and Feedback. The use of an open communication system, such as that of a T-group, is highly congruent with the aims of a cognitive skill oriented program. That is, the permissive, democratic home atmosphere that facilitates cognitive, verbal, and intellectual skills in children (Baldwin, Kelhorn and Breese, 1945), is highly similar to the procedures of participant, small group work of the T-group variety.
4. Communication and Candor. It is necessary for the group members to be actual participants in a democratic type group process in a completely open system. That is, there should be no hidden purposes, no secret agenda, or manipulative intent on the part of the group leaders that is not shared with the participants. Thus, we were frank, in acknowledging that this was an experimental project, and we depended on their honest evaluations to guide our later work.

Results

The participants were 13 Negro mothers of preschool children who attended a Day Care program. The average mother completed the 11th grade, was married, worked, and had four children, of which two attended the Day Care program. There were a series of six weekly meetings.

The first part of each meeting was devoted to the discussion and practical demonstration of various things parents can do to expand their child's cognitive world, build his verbal power, and generally, to enhance his pre-reading skills. The second part of the meeting utilized the T-group methods to discuss aspects of the mother-child interaction.

The Participation of the Mothers. The group was made up of a core of eight regular attenders who were present for at least two-thirds of the meetings (four or more), and five satelites who appeared at one or two meetings but were never a part of the group process. The eight core mothers accounted for practically all the attendance. The median number of core mothers in attendance at a meeting was 6.5.

In view of the fact that these women worked, were the heads of households, etc., it is quite remarkable that the attendance was as good as it was. The mothers seemed quite interested in the activities, and seemed eager to carry out their assignments. When the mothers tried to summarize what had been presented at the end of a meeting, or when they tried to describe what they had done with their assignments, it appeared that the level of their language usage and communicating ability was extremely low. Thus, when they took the objects home and questioned their children, it appeared doubtful that this was done in a very stimulating situation or with real understanding of why they were doing what they were. Moreover, the reports were heavily biased towards showing off the child or maintaining good image as a mother. This is perhaps not surprising, but it suggests that for the future, the structure for such procedures need to be embedded in even more concrete activities.

The third week marked a real turning point for the group, in terms of the formal presentations and for the dynamic sessions as well. The mothers came with the books which they had made with their children. All of them seemed quite pleased

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and proud, even eager to participate in discussing topics such as discipline, television, sex-role related behaviors, aggressiveness, and so on. Most of the mothers indicated that they had thought the meetings were going to involve teaching them reading, and the reaction throughout the group was that of overwhelming relief that the activities had not related to this.

In general, all of the mothers seemed quite concerned about their competency as mothers, one or two seeming pretty secure, but most of the others seemingly feeling inadequate in one way or another. Their concerns for their children ranged over the entire gamut of children-rearing concerns. It was the feeling of the group leaders that many of the mothers had a lot of hostility toward their kids as indicated by their over-enthusiastic endorsement of corporal punishment and many of the stringent rules and demands imposed upon the children.

Focus on the Child. It was apparent that many of the mothers often failed to interact with their children in a way that would build cognitive skills. Rather, they took pleasure in telling about their children in an undifferentiated manner, telling of trivialities rather narcissistically, instead of keeping to the task. These mothers were engrossed with their children on all levels--identifying with them, morally, sensually, emotionally, pursuing their own ideals, punishing them, etc. Though potentially risky, this topic might yeild rich rewards if dealt with by a group that was stable. When a mother volunteered to bring her children, it was plain that she wanted to show off how fine they were. The others, sensing this, were resentful.

On the other hand, the mothers' overinvestment in their children may have been too sensitive an issue for them to cope with. An indication of the mothers' insecurity in relating to their children was their stereotyped and exaggerated conceptions of morality and the enforcement of discipline. They set rigid standards of right and wrong, they refused to answer questions about sex, etc.

Repeatedly, many of the mothers too readily identified with their children facing a cognitive task. Sometimes they puzzled over a name and function; sometimes they got lost in the details of a story they read to the child. This phenomenon goes beyond the middle-class narcissistic preoccupation with one's child to a symbiotic quality of a relative lack of ego boundary between self and child. Three factors might contribute:

(a) Low intelligence of the mothers,

(b) Constant experience of herself as a child through her interaction with significant others, including her family, lover, husband, employer, etc., an

(c) Lack of adult objects in which to invest herself.

In summary, the active and continued participation of the mother in the group was highly encouraging. However, it seems unlikely that this first project was very effective in modifying parents' behavior. This group experience succeeded in doing little more than demonstrating the diagnostic-evaluative function that the group method could serve. Extrapolating, it seems possible to use the same method to work with culturally deprived parents for more frankly educative and therapeutic goals.

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